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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the 1991 graduate assistant strike at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the underlying reasons for the strike, and the role of graduate assistants at American universities. It argues that low pay, lack of fringe benefits, poor working conditions, and uncompromising administration attitudes forced graduate assistants to seek to redress their grievances through unionization and, ultimately, a work stoppage. It asserts that the university administration took an extremely adversarial position vis a vis graduate employee unionization, opposing unionization on various fronts. Although many graduate students believed that the faculty would support their cause, professors by and large supported administration policies in regard to unionization and the strike. The paper argues that the issue of graduate assistant unionization exposed rather than created some basic tensions related to graduate study including the following: (1) graduate assistants do not enjoy the rights and protections of other university employees; (2) graduate assistant employment is limited in duration and tenuous in nature; (3) graduate student institutions are not structured to encourage graduate student-faculty collegiality; and (4) the nature of graduate study encourages a spirit of rivalry among graduate students and professors. (MDM)

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# Neither Fish Nor Fowl:
# Graduate Students, Unionization, and the Academy

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**Neither Fish Nor Fowl:**
**Graduate Students, Unionization, and the Academy**

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When the graduate students at a large state University went on strike in November, 1991, we did not quite know what we were getting ourselves into. Graduate student employees had been working on a union for five years prior to the strike, and each step toward recognition had been an uphill battle. It had been a difficult task to organize the 2,000 graduate students: to keep them informed about the sorry state of negotiations, educated about the importance of certain union concerns, and finally, angry enough at the administration's pandering and paternalism to go on strike. While we eventually won a strong contract, one that benefited and aided all graduate student employees in all disciplines, these gains were secured at some cost as well. I'd like to discuss briefly the reasons for the strike in order to set the stage for what was the most surprising and disillusioning lesson of the strike--the lack of support from the University faculty.

Why do graduate students wish to unionize? Over the past five years, graduate student employees have become interested in unionization as a way to secure reasonable treatment from universities who employ them at subsistence wages to maintain whole segments of academic curriculum--in other words, graduate students unionize for survival. Unfortunately, the unfair particulars at my own institution reflect the typical graduate student employee situation.

At my University, graduate students, not faculty, were responsible for teaching at least seventy five percent of all introductory courses and general education requirements, yet at a fraction of a professor's salary. Graduate employee stipends were among the lowest in the country, even though the cost of living in the area was among the highest. Graduate students had

no power to contest the huge slash in graduate student jobs the University had initiated instead of implementing across-the-board cuts, and graduate students were the only university-employed group which did not have any health benefit compensation. Since graduate students were so integral to the functioning of the University, it seemed only reasonable that they receive a living wage and fair arbitration procedures for this contribution.

From the beginning, the University administration took an extremely adversarial position vis a vis graduate employee unionization. The administration recognized that a union of graduate students would eat away at its power structure, both in financial and structural terms. The administration would have to pay better salaries for graduate students and take seriously graduate students' concerns, which ranged from unsafe working areas to unequal health fees, from unsupervised hiring and firing procedures to broken contract agreements. With graduate student unionization, in other words, the administration would lose the ability to do as it pleased and what it pleased with its graduate employees. The administration's response to each protest, teach in, and one-day work stoppage was to spend money on police backup or on costly after-the-fact paperwork, rather than to directly acknowledge the rights and needs of its graduate employees. Finally, after three long years of alternative strategies, a strike seemed the only viable solution.

During the pre-strike discussions about the efficacy of a strike, graduate students anticipated a hostile reaction from the administration. After all, the administration had engineered the very policies graduate students were fighting against. Graduate students believed that for the most part, however, professors would see through the self-serving tactics of the administration and support the graduate student struggle. The assumption was that the faculty would champion graduate employee unionization because professors had been graduate students themselves, greatly benefit from graduate student teaching and research, and themselves enjoy the financial and legal security of unionization--indeed, the faculty union had successfully raised

professors' salaries from among the lowest to among the highest in the country.

It came as a surprise that while some professors were thoroughly supportive, overall, there was a lack of support and solidarity from faculty members during the strike. Professors who had themselves recently experienced negotiating with an unwilling administration were unbelievably quick to adopt the administration's point of view--even when the administration started using professors and heads of departments as part of a union bashing technique. The administration used many under-handed techniques against the graduate students; most faculty members would admit that the procedures were unfair without challenging them. Faculty members questioned the graduate students' motives after hear briefing from the administration, and even the professors most supportive of the graduate student demands were be persuaded of the on-going validity of the strike only after hearing the graduate student report of the negotiations. At each stage of negotiations, graduate students became guilty until they could prove themselves innocent. It became clear that professors as well as administrators found the idea of graduate student independence and collectivity a threatening one.

I would like to argue that the issue of graduate student unionization exposed rather than created some basic tensions about graduate study. The resistance faculty members showed and their lack of support (whether institutional or individual) for the graduate student struggle for fair treatment highlights the ambiguity and instability at the heart of graduate study: Who are graduate students, and what is expected of them?

Perhaps the most frustrating answer is that graduate students are both employees and students; they are neither fish nor fowl. David Kirp writes that the Berkeley graduate student strikers made him ``[recall] the lament of a baseball player during his salary negotiations. `Whenever I call it a game, they call it work,' he complained, `but when I call it work, they insist it's a game''' (43). On a more theoretical level, while

graduate students are defined as apprentice teachers or researchers, frequently the terms of their employment require a responsibility equal to their Ph.D. holding colleagues; that is to say, graduate students may not teach as many classes as professors, but insofar as both are teaching classes, graduate students and professors shoulder the same kind/degree of responsibility. If graduate students "do" the same kind of work--teaching, researching--as their professorial counterparts, what exactly is the definition of apprentice?

The instability of the graduate student's position in the university system perpetuates rather than reduces tension and distance between faculty and graduate students. What does this distance, this us/them split between professors and their potential colleagues, obscure? How much is the very identity of professors predicated on the limited identity of their graduate students? What do graduate students and faculty learn from these limitations?

Perhaps one reason that graduate student institutions are not structured to encourage graduate student-faculty collegiality is that scholarship is far more valued than teaching and advising in the academic profession as a whole. As Page Smith acknowledges in Killing the Spirit, ``tenure depends almost exclusively on research/publication'' and ``even the most brilliant teaching will not save a young assistant professor if he/she fails to achieve the minimum standard of research/publication'' (116-118). Thus professors must separate their teaching selves from their scholarly selves in order to stay in the game.

The lack of professor-graduate student comradeship during the strike stripped away any illusion of equality and forced me to see the naked power structure underneath. While I was aware that some degree of hierarchy existed, I did not realize how integral and intractable this hierarchy is to the academic world. Perhaps hierarchy is to the university system what class is to America--it informs all behavior and circumstances but is rarely discussed or acknowledged--at least in terms of its implications. Graduate students might be locked into a position that is

separate and not equal to faculty both on an administrative and departmental level, but professors also have a rigidly inscribed and restricted position.

This is where the tricky concept of apprenticeship comes in. Graduate students are frequently both teachers and students; still this duality doesn't give them more leeway, it gives them less. As teachers they share the same responsibilities as their fellow professors, but their role as students separates them from these professors--a separation far more necessary for the professors than for the students. After all, it is the professors' identity and not the graduate students' which seems to be at stake in this relationship. Redefining the interpersonal terrain of graduate students' position would entail recognizing that graduate students are neither apprentices nor assistants, as the terms are commonly understood.

The nature of graduate study encourages the spirit of rivalry between graduate students and professors. I hate to use the word rivalry, because it is precisely what I am most opposed to in the profession, but somehow it conveys the crux of the matter. An underlying threat of usurpation complicates the faculty-student relationship. Apprenticeship is so close to learning the secrets of the trade that it makes most professors uncomfortable with cooperation or collaboration. On the one hand graduate students are very useful to professors--they can do research, teach or grade classes, provide insight into scholarly pursuits in a seminar. On the other hand, because they wish to be author, not researcher; to be teacher, not grader or section leader, to develop their own line of insight, not to provide insight for other's work, graduate students foreshadow the possibility of change. Graduate students always symbolize the threat of displacement.

Since academic success is predicated on change--new theories, interpretations, insights cancel out the old--graduate students define what professors are not. Graduate student apprenticeship is in the professor's best interests; apprenticeship highlights her/his present accomplishments as

recognized scholar, sustains a distance from the previous identity as graduate student, and keeps the possibility of future displacement at bay. Graduate student identity becomes a multivalent sign, and unfortunately it is in professors best interests (be it at the department or university level) to delimit and fix this sign's meaning in reductive and self-serving ways.

The spirit of rivalry isn't just an issue between graduate students and faculty, but permeates the entire academic structure. Two scholars working in the same field are simultaneously colleagues and rivals. Part of academic scholarship is predicated on the need to discredit other scholar's theories in order to credit one's own work. In a certain sense, each scholar is a character assassin whose duty it is to clean up the field to impose his or her our own interpretive order upon it. As Jane Tompkins concludes in West of Everything, ``Violence takes place in the conference rooms at scholarly meetings and in the pages of professional journals, and although it's not the same thing to savage a person's book as it is to kill them with a six-gun, I suspect that the nature of the feelings that motivate both acts is qualitatively the same'' (231-232). This approach can only create distance between scholars.

In a recent essay, Stanley Fish explores what he feels is at the heart of academia--masochism. He writes, ``It is important for academics to feel abused, for in the psychic economy of the academy, oppression is a sign of virtue'' (105). Fish explains that because the academy continually requires professors to be in the position of submission, in job interviews, publishing, teaching, they have grown to like feeling abused, which leads to a desire to abuse back: ``Now if martyrdom and self-denial, even self hatred, are the true treasures of the academic life, it follows that the generous academic will be eager to share those treasures with others'' (105). Fish offers neither reasons nor solutions for how and why this cycle of abuse (both the giving and receiving end of it) is endemic to the academic structure,

and instead enjoys a smarmy pleasure in holding this unpleasant reality up to the light.

Is this cycle of abuse integral to the academic structure? Must we enter into this vicious cycle even if we disapprove of it? Perhaps that's the underlying reason for why I went on strike--to voice my disapproval of the unpleasant situation in which my choice of career had placed me. I hope that it's possible to change the pattern, because I value education and I feel angry that with all the emphasis on positioning, publishing, and promotion, education seems to be the least important item on the academic agenda. Recognizing the significant problems in academia is an important start. And then, clearly, not reproducing those problems is the next step. Hopefully, graduate students, the next generation of scholars, will also be a new generation of scholars, willing to explore and redefine the interpersonal terrain of our career choice as well as the literary landscape.

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